

THE ROOTS OF EVIL: extract

The TARDIS had materialized in a sort of woody cave, its walls formed by thick trunks, which had twined and fused together over centuries. The floor was a latticework of roots. Here and there a dark hole opened between them. The Doctor bounded around this space delightedly, running his hands over the smooth silver bark, saying things like: ‘Grown from heavily modified holly DNA, I think!’ and ‘Too small to create this much gravity on its own ... They must have a generator somewhere. That’s how they stop the atmosphere escaping into space ...’

Leela ignored him. He might know about DNA and gravity and space, but she knew trees. She’d known each individual tree within a day’s walk of her home village. Even as a child she’d understood that trees each had their own character, like people. She looked around her at the scarred and knotted trunks, and listened to the way that this tree creaked and stirred and shifted. It seemed to her that it was ancient – and evil.

And she could feel eyes on her. Someone was watching them. She turned, reaching for her knife. A narrow passageway opened between the trunks nearby, and from the darkness there a boy stared out: wide, scared eyes in a brown face.

‘Doctor ...’ she whispered.

The Doctor saw the boy. ‘Hello!’ he said.

The boy seemed unable to move, unable to speak. He cowered a little deeper into the shadows as the Doctor walked towards him, but that was all.

The Doctor looked pleased to see the boy. He always looked pleased to see everybody. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled paper bag. ‘Would you like a jelly baby?’ he asked, holding it out to the boy.

The boy looked down at the bag, then up again at the Doctor's reassuring grin. He didn't look at all reassured. He said, 'You are really him! You are *the Doctor*!'

'That's right. And this is Leela. What's your name?'

'Ven,' said the boy.

'Ven? That's a good name. Catchy. Easy to remember.'

The boy said, 'It's short for "Vengeance-Will-Be-Ours-When-The-Doctor-Dies-A-Thousand-Agonizing-Deaths".'

The Doctor's grin faded. 'Well,' he said, 'that *is* a bit of a mouthful. I can see why you shortened it ... Are you *sure* you wouldn't like a jelly baby?'

A tremor rippled through the tree, making all the trunks and branches creak and whisper, shuddering the roots underfoot.

'There is danger here,' said Leela firmly. She turned back towards the TARDIS. But in the few seconds that her attention had been focused on the Doctor and Ven, the chamber had changed. New shoots were sprouting silently from the floor and twining around the TARDIS, enclosing it in a cage of living wood, which grew thicker with each passing instant. Leela ran forward and tugged at a shoot. It was young, green and pliable, but as fast as she pulled it away from the TARDIS another grew to take its place.

'Do something!' she shouted at the Doctor. 'Use your magic!'

'The sonic screwdriver, you mean?' The Doctor took off his hat and scratched his head, staring at the mass of branches and tendrils where the TARDIS had been. 'It has no effect on wood, I'm afraid.'

Leela gave a cry of frustration and drew her knife. The thinner tendrils parted easily enough, amid sticky splatterings of sap, but more were sprouting all the time. The ones that had grown first were already thick and woody.

‘You will never free it!’ shouted Ven. Outraged by what Leela was doing to the tree, he forgot his fear of the Doctor and ran to her, struggling to pull her away. ‘The tree has awoken! You will never get your box back! You will die here! Let justice be done!’